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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000178

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND RTG SPOKESMAN DISCUSS RED SHIRTS,  
PM ABHISIT, LAO HMONG

REF: BANGKOK 61 (THAILAND TAKES A STAND)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with RTG spokesperson Dr. Panitan Wattanayakorn at the Residence January 21 to review the latest political developments in Thailand. Panitan analyzed the three main factions within the anti-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), aka the "red-shirts," and characterized the Puea Thai party's public embrace of several low profile retired generals in recent weeks as less than noteworthy. Panitan also provided his assessment of Prime Minister Abhisit's core strengths as PM after completing first year in office, told the Ambassador he expected the current government to survive at least another year, and stressed the RTG's commitment to pressing the Lao government to adhere to its promises with regards to the recently repatriated Lao Hmong community. Panitan told the Ambassador that Prime Minister Abhisit would like to visit Washington in the coming months. End Summary.

RED SHIRTS AND PUEA THAI

2. (C) The Ambassador began the meeting by asking Panitan for his assessment of the red shirt movement. Panitan told the Ambassador the red shirts were fragmented and had effectively divided into three separate groups. The first group, which enjoyed the media spotlight and contained most of the UDD's celebrity fire power, was in many ways the public face of the movement. According to Panitan, this group sought out the limelight and spent lots of money, but did little of the hard work and fundraising necessary to keep a movement in business. This first faction was widely resented by the others.

13. (C) According to Panitan, faction number two consisted of the foot soldiers on the ground throughout the country. UDD supporters in this category were localized and acted largely independently of each other.

14. (C) The third UDD faction was composed primarily of former activists and communists and had longer-term political goals, rather than simply returning Thaksin to power. This group had little to no regard for the political wing of the anti-government movement, Puea Thai, and viewed the first two red shirt groups as irrelevant. Panitan told the Ambassador he had several former students in this camp (Note: Panitan was a former Associate Professor of International Relations before joining the government. End Note.) Panitan also said Chaturon Chaisang, the former DPM, and Dr. Thongchai Winichakul, a professor at the University of Wisconsin were among those who formed the backbone of this red shirt faction. Panitan told the Ambassador this faction had assembled the finest minds in the red shirt movement, and how they decided to approach the question of the monarchy and succession would be critical. If this group decided to focus its energies on improving the monarchy through change, rather than tearing it down, and enhancing the overall democratic process, it could play a productive role in Thailand's future.

15. (C) When the Ambassador noted that the Puea Thai party had successfully enlisted a handful of retired generals into its ranks in recent weeks, Panitan dismissed the generals in question as marginal figures at best. According to Panitan, those 25 or so former military officials were just a drop in the bucket when one considered that the Thai armed forces stood more than 300,000 strong. Furthermore, the generals in

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question all had one thing in common: they were lazy and incompetent during their careers and had only demonstrated an interest in enriching themselves. Moreover, as former generals, they would not take orders from party politicians. For these reasons, the Democrat party leadership was delighted with this development. The generals were, in other words, perfect candidates to join a party like Puea Thai in Panitan's mind.

ABHISIT  
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16. (C) Turning to the subject of Prime Minister Abhisit's first year in office, the Ambassador asked Panitan how he thought the PM had performed thus far. Panitan told the Ambassador he felt the PM had done a good job in the face of significant challenges within the party, the coalition, as well as the nation as a whole. As far as the coalition was concerned, Panitan felt the PM and the Democrat party would be able to weather the most recent challenge to coalition stability: minority coalition partner demands that the constitution be changed to allow for single member districts. Panitan told the Ambassador the issue was a question of life or death for smaller parties and he felt the Democrat party would be willing to compromise on this issue without negatively impacting Democrat party electoral prospects moving forward, despite reservations over reverting to a system that led to a greater incidence of electoral violations.

17. (C) Panitan told the Ambassador he expected the current government to last at least another year. He acknowledged that while the PM was far from perfect, he had four core strengths as a leader that allowed him to do his job well. The first strength was that he was always exceedingly well prepared. According to Panitan, the PM kept abreast of all the issues in his Cabinet Minister's portfolios, and invariably arrived at meetings better prepared and knowledgeable than even his Ministers. Whether the issue at hand related to a commercial/economic matter, Burma, or tensions with Cambodia, etc., the PM was always the most

prepared person at any given meeting, allowing him to steer meetings and shape outcomes.

¶8. (C) Panitan further said the PM was always composed and kept a level head. Panitan told the Ambassador he had never seen the PM raise his voice in anger or demonstrate any loss in control. This even keeled temperament had served him well thus far. The PM's third key asset was his strong moral and ethical foundation. As reported in reftel, the PM's decision to force the former Deputy Health Minister's resignation in the face of corruption allegations served to highlight the PM's strong moral convictions. Perhaps even more importantly, according to Panitan, by tackling this issue, the PM had raised the ethical bar for future PMs in Thailand. Thailand had a long way to go before it started matching the anti-corruption in government efforts in countries like South Korea, but the PM was making a difference.

¶9. (C) Finally, the PM's openness to criticism and dissent had created a high level of transparency in government. Furthermore, this open approach allowed the public to fully understand what was taking place in the government at all times, an especially critical dynamic given all the political uncertainty over the course of the last few years.

#### TRAVELS

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¶10. (C) Turning to travel plans, Panitan said that in the next six months the PM planned to travel to Russia, India, China, the Middle East, and Latin America, most likely

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including Brazil. Panitan told the Ambassador the PM would also very much like to visit the United States, and the Ambassador noted that he would convey the message to Washington.

#### LAO HMONG

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¶11. (C) On the subject of the two Lao Hmong groups forcibly repatriated to Laos last December, the Ambassador reiterated USG disappointment with the return, and stressed that the return scenario in Laos had not yet developed as the RTG had promised. It was now incumbent on the Thai side to pressure the Lao government to abide by the commitments it made prior to the repatriation. Specifically, the Ambassador reminded Panitan the RTG told the U.S. it would be granted access to the Hmong in Laos, and that had not yet happened. Indeed, the GOL recently indicated access might not be granted until April. In addition to the access question, the Lao government had not taken any steps on the resettlement issue either, and Thai pressure would be critical on this question as well. The RTG would need to do more to demonstrate that it was willing to live up to its side of the bargain. Panitan agreed that the Lao government had been slow to abide by its commitments, and he promised the Ambassador that the RTG would continue to press the Lao on these critical issues.

JOHN